

February 4, 2024 @ Trinity Bixby
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Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

There's an experience most of us have had at one point or another – of riding in a car with a kid who sees a shiny fast-food place, and says, “ooh, can we have food?” The response from the driver is usually, “No, dear child, we have food at home.” From the adult's standpoint, food at home is less expensive and more nutritious – but from the kid's standpoint, the food at home is usually not as shiny or packaged with a new toy. The memes of this today usually take the kid's perspective – adults, you know, have no sense of what is cool or amazing, so “we have *blank* at home” usually means something of less value, or a knockoff brand.

But what about the Bible? Today, we've heard a story of “we have miracles at home” that shows that God works wonders at home and in public! Most of the stories of Jesus' miracles are in public – that makes sense, because the gospels are not an autobiography. In order for there to be stories for us to read and tell today, Jesus had to do things in public where people could see him and the miracles – and start telling each other about them. So, it's nice to get a more intimate perspective of a miracle, like in the first chapter of Mark, where Jesus hears that Simon's mother-in-law is suffering from a fever, and he goes to her and heals her. (Now, a side-note – as you know, Pastor Elana and I both dislike when Biblical characters are left nameless. There's a slight tradition of referring to Peter's mother-in-law as Amatha¹ – So, since that's a lot shorter, I'm going to call her that from now on in this sermon.) Fevers are scary, even in our world today – and they were all the more so in the ancient world, before penicillin and other antibiotics could help take them down. It's Jesus' ease with the healing of Amatha that I'm sure helped cement it in the minds of his disciples.

She's sick – he reaches down as she reaches up, and she is healed, renewed, and reinvigorated as she is lifted up. It's not any less of a miracle, just because it

¹ Amatha appears to derive from a Hebrew root (חָמַם hamam) that means “fiery” or “heated” – ironic for the name of a woman suffering a fever. A noun form – *hamoth* – means “mother-in-law” in Aramaic.

happens at home or it's such a brief encounter. And that's part of its staying power, too – the merest touch of Jesus is enough to lift you up. “We have miracles at home” doesn't mean that they're any less meaningful! Indeed, as Isaiah puts it, “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will rise up on wings like eagles.”

I know that Isaiah 40 is a popular passage for those who are struggling with illness and infirmity. I'm also not ignoring the irony of preaching about it after having spent the last week struggling with a terrible cough. Even if I'm now firmly past the time of being considered a “youth,” I've certainly experienced extra tiredness and weariness this week. But I wonder if that hasn't given me a different perspective on this passage than usual, because a part of it stood out to me that ordinarily doesn't. In the passage, Isaiah reminds the people of the great contrast between humanity and God – that God is so far beyond humanity that we are like locusts to God, our entire lives like a single crop cycle, planted, shooting up from the ground, fruiting, harvesting, dying, and being planted again. Immediately after these observations, God asks through Isaiah, “To whom will you compare me? Look up at the sky and consider; Who created these?”

I wonder, just how one looks up at the sky to consider the “heavenly attendants” – a fancy name for the stars and planets. Is it as a person standing, craning their neck back uncomfortably? Is it as a messenger, noting the passing of time as they travel long into the night? Or might it be, as I've experienced this week, the person who is exhausted, who can travel no further – and lies on the ground to still soak in the marvel of God's creation? If you are lying on the ground, looking up at the skies – then, it truly is a weird thing to declare that “my way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament.” I mean, you're out there, in the open! God sees us, loves us, heals us even when we are in deepest darkness, in our most protected areas, even when we're hiding under the blankets following an earthquake. Lying on the ground, marveling at the heavens above – well, that's a perfect time to picture God swooping down like a hawk or eagle, lifting us up, and encouraging us to live in God's way. You see, God stretches out God's wings to all of us – renewing our strength, our relationships, and our weary hearts and minds.

God's understanding is beyond ours, but what we do understand is that God is good. Every time we wonder about God's creation, God reminds us that God's love is greater than we can know – but just an instant of experiencing God's love changes us for a lifetime. Perhaps we look up at the stars, and seek to find miracles “out there” – and God reminds us that we have miracles at home, if only we care to look.

Before the people of Capernaum knew that Amatha was healed, they still showed up at her door, begging Jesus to heal them. Jesus spends a bit of time with each of the people who seek him, offering healing after healing, miracle after miracle. It's only after a long night of healing that Jesus finds time to rest – but he gets up early, and heads out for time to be on his own. I wonder if Jesus was seeking time with God. I wonder if Jesus wanted to marvel at creation, too. I wonder if Jesus felt the need to be on the move, to spread healing and love further than just in Capernaum.

When the disciples track him down, the first thing they tell Jesus is, “Everyone was hunting for you!” The word in Greek means just that – hunting, like tracking down an animal. And Jesus just says, “It's time we went somewhere else.” Like a small flock of birds catching the thermals, Jesus and the disciples take flight, alighting at village after village throughout Galilee and Judea, teaching, preaching, and healing. They bring a “wingtouch of renewal.” Even if they don't spend long in any one place, they bring the Word of God, the Way of Love. This renews the weary, binds together the polarized peoples, and brings a new understanding of peace to a world in sore need of a miracle at home.

I wonder, what would have been if the disciples wanted to stay in Capernaum? It was Peter's home, and the Zebedee boys, too. Could they have amassed wealth and status as gatekeepers of the Messiah? But that's not Jesus' Way – he heals for free, and doesn't stay and nest. His miracles are simultaneously those at home and those far from home.

So, too, I wonder, what could we today do with a “wingtouch of renewal”? As we reflect on the wings of renewal that God extends to us, let us remember that miracles are not confined to grand gestures or public spectacles. Just as Jesus

healed Amatha in the quiet of her home, so too does God work miracles in the intimate spaces of our lives. I encourage you to be open to recognizing and embracing these moments of renewal, whether they come in times of healing, connection, or quiet reflection. Let us not overlook the miracles that unfold in our midst, but be ready to share them with others as instruments of God's love and renewal in the world. We can tell others of Jesus' miracles, and serve others just as Jesus has served us. We can strive to renew others, through time and attention, through loving kindness and connection. We can recognize that we need times of solitude – and times of togetherness, and honor that for each other.

I wonder, what do you hear in Isaiah's words now? "Don't you know? Haven't you heard? God is everlasting, the creator of everything you see and hear and experience, and everything you don't. God understands more than you can reach, and God gives power to the tired, revives the exhausted. Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength through the touch of a wing – then they will fly on those wings like eagles."

As you go out today, may you carry the assurance that God's wingtouch of renewal is always with you, ready to lift you up and carry you forward on your journey of faith. And may you, in turn, extend those newly-strengthened wings of love and renewal to those you encounter, bringing hope and healing to a world in need. Amen.